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Afro-Brazilians

Profile

It is estimated that between 65 million and 120 million Brazilians are of African ancestry. They number 80 million or 48 per cent of the total population in official statistics, although 65 million was the official 1991 Census figure (data: Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística).

Africans preserved their cultural heritage and religions. Brazilian Portuguese was richly influenced by the speech of African peoples, and a new Afro-Brazilian vocabulary developed. African religions survive in Brazil today.

Afro-Brazilian religions constitute powerful sources of inner strength, enabling believers to reaffirm their African identity. Candomblé and its traditions are central to the lives of many Afro-Brazilians. Religious leaders conduct their ceremonies in Yoruba. Candomblé rituals have been incorporated into the fabric of Brazilian national identity from New Year's Eve offerings to the ocean (during *Revellion*), *Capoeira* dance, Samba circles (*rodas*) and culinary preferences such as Acarajé fritters. In Umbanda there is a loose association of Roman Catholic saints with African and indigenous deities. It is common in urban areas where it is not possible to establish full-sized Candomblé *terreiros*, which require relatively large plots of land. There are significant regional differences regarding the practice of Umbanda and many religious leaders borrow from diverse Western and non-Western religious traditions. Despite strong African religious roots in Brazil, charismatic Pentecostalism brought by foreign missionaries is one of the fastest growing religions in Brazil today.

Many Afro-Brazilians are becoming aware of the degree to which their socio-economic, political cultural and religious, identities have been suppressed. Many hundreds of black consciousness and civil rights organizations are actively at work today. The Afro-Brazilian press started in 1933 with the publication of *A Voz da Raça*. There are currently many community-based magazines, including the *Raça*, *Írohin* and online journal *Afirma Revista Negra*. These magazines act as a catalyst for organizing, claiming rights and fighting racism. The television station TV da Gente, launched in November 2005 by celebrity Jose 'Netinho' de Paula Neto, has contributed to the increasing visibility of African-descendants in the media.

While some Afro-Brazilians see racism as primarily a cultural problem to be solved through the development of black identity, others believe the struggle against racism must seek to change economic, social and political structures. The Afro-Brazilian movement has contributed significantly to policy changes in all of these areas to improve the quality of life of black Brazilians.

Historical context

After the decimation of the local indigenous population in the seventeenth century, an estimated 3.65 million enslaved Africans were imported to Brazil; the majority of these were brought to Brazil's first capital, Salvador da Bahia. Urban slave labour differed from plantation life; slaves were not passive

victims of the system and many escaped to found their own '*quilombos*'.

Brazil did not abolish slavery until 1888. Initially the Portuguese authorities promoted miscegenation as a way of ensuring a Portuguese presence in under-populated regions. But, fearing the increasing black population, Brazil subsequently opened its country to white immigrants, who were given preference over black people in jobs, housing and education.

The Portuguese attitude towards miscegenation is often offered as proof of their open-mindedness on race. The Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre has been quoted as saying that *negritude*, or black consciousness, is a 'mysticism that has no place in Brazil'. Racism *is*, however, an issue of importance in Brazil; although by law all Brazilians enjoy equality, and racial or colour discrimination is a criminal offence, for many years advertisements for jobs included the phrase '*boa aparência*' (good appearance), meaning that only light-skinned people need apply.

By the 1980 Census Brazilians had coined over 136 terms to whiten themselves, and avoid racial classification as black. Recent studies by academics such as Edward Telles demonstrate the powerful impact of skin colour on economic opportunity. Telles shows that, within the same family, lighter-skinned siblings have greater socio-economic opportunities, in tests that control for all other factors including income and educational levels. Despite slight differences of opportunity based on skin tone, official Brazilian government statistics demonstrate that the most glaring socio-economic gaps in Brazil are between black Brazilians and Brazilians of European descent. Most Afro-Brazilians lack economic power, political influence and effective representation, and are reassessing the doctrine that has been taught for centuries - that *embranquecimento* (whitening) offers a route to socio-economic improvement. The policy of miscegenation was intended to minimize the African and indigenous presence in the country, by presenting a myth of racial democracy that promoted European identity by encouraging black people to seek social validation exclusively outside of their own racial group.

Afro-Brazilian women's movements

The Frente Negra Brasileira, founded in 1930 as the first national civil rights organization in Brazil, saw race and gender rights as intimately related through the creation of Frente Negrinhas in 1931; the women's movement obtained the right to vote in 1932. Women played an important role in the escaped slave communities and are still important leaders in the Candomblé religion today. In 1950, the first national council for black women was established, known as I Conselho Nacional da Mulher Negra. This council promoted voting rights, advocated for policies and programmes within black communities, and unified the black movement. The leading role of Afro-Brazilian women leaders and their organizations is remarkable given the high level of societal marginalization of black women in Brazil. Black women earn between 28 per cent to 47 per cent of what non-black men earn in the country; 80 per cent of employed Afro-Brazilian women are manual workers, half are maids and the rest are self-employed in even more precarious temporary domestic work. Despite the challenges facing Afro-Brazilian women, they have learned to negotiate their own space, within both black and women's organizations, creating their own black women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to promote racial and gender equality. Afro-Brazilian women play an active role in the Movimento Negro Nacional, whose ties with the Workers' and Democratic Workers' parties have encouraged Afro-Brazilians to stand as election candidates.

Current issues

Census

Although the country has been collecting data on race since the 1872 Census, the information did not shed light on the socio-economic condition of Afro-descendant groups, because data sets were limited and difficult to compare across years. Afro-Brazilians are categorized in the census as mixed race, *pardo* or *preto*. In the 1980s and 1990s Afro-Brazilian activists tried to influence the population to recognize their African ancestry and not to deny their blackness. Black movement groups also analysed the census data independently and found significant socio-economic gaps between racial groups. The data demonstrate the close correlation between people of African origin, whether they are classified as *preto* or *pardo*, and poverty. For practical and political purposes, most researchers, academics and activists use this combined data for all Afro-descendants because the socio-economic indicators show significant differences between Afro-descendants (*pretos* and *pardos*) and whites in Brazil, and little difference among people of African descent.

Socio-economic inequality

Afro-Brazilians are about half the population, but their economic participation is only 20 per cent of the GDP. Unemployment is 50 per cent higher among Afro-Brazilians than among whites, and blacks who are employed earn less than half of what whites earn. The majority of Afro-Brazilians, 78 per cent, live below the poverty line compared to 40 per cent of whites, and the life expectancy of African-descendants is only 66 years compared to 72 years for European-descendants. Half of all blacks are illiterate, while less than 20 per cent of whites are unable to read. Only 4 per cent of Afro-Brazilians between the ages of 18 and 24 have attended a university, compared to 12 per cent of whites. The heated debate about affirmative action in higher education only impacts 25 per cent of the current African-descendant population, because the vast majority of Afro-Brazilians have less than 11 years of formal schooling; 40 per cent of blacks have completed less than seven years of schooling, and are therefore ineligible for college admission.

The statistics disaggregated by race widely available throughout Brazil demonstrate a consistent socio-economic gap between blacks and whites due to discrimination in every aspect of society. Recent data from the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), for example, demonstrates that Afro-Brazilians, regardless of level of education, position or title, are far much more likely to experience downward socio-economic mobility than whites. Race and poverty are strongly correlated, in large part because racial discrimination causes poverty.

Human rights

A report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture found that most victims of torture in Brazilian prisons were of Afro-Brazilian descent. According to the US Department of State, Afro-Brazilians receive higher sentences than their white counterparts for the same crime, and are more likely to suffer discrimination in prison. The IPEA found that black people were at least twice as likely to be killed by the police than whites in cities like Rio de Janeiro. The situation of blacks in the criminal justice system in Brazil could be far worse than the data indicate. The Institute for Religious Studies (ISER) found that police homicides were twice as high as officially reported and that, in the majority of the cases investigated (64%), the victims were shot in the back at close range - and most of these victims were of African descent. In Rio de Janeiro a hot line established to track racist discrimination during a two-year period found 104 cases of discrimination in the criminal justice system. This was considered an unusually high number because most individuals do not report these crimes out of fear of retaliation by the police, who operate with impunity. In Rio de Janeiro 80 per cent of robbery victims did not register the crime with the police because they were afraid to interact with police officers and 76 per cent of citizens thought that the police force as a whole was directly involved with death squads terrorizing black communities. Afro-Brazilians are gravely impacted by serious crime; death by homicide is 87 per cent higher among African-descendants than in the population as a whole.

Since the UN World Conference against Racism, Brazil has taken significant measures to increase equality in the region. Edna Roland, an Afro-Brazilian activist was an important contributor to this process and was designated a conference rapporteur and a UN eminent expert on African-descendants. One of the major results of the conference in Brazil was the formation of the Secretariat for the Promotion of Racial Equality, SEPPIR, with over 150 staff members and over 200 racial inclusion initiatives. Led by Minister Matilde Ribeiro, this office is responsible for Brazilian inclusion policy for black people and closely follows the nation's policy towards Africa. SEPPIR is a significant step forward, and the minister has been effective at influencing other ministries to take on projects to promote the inclusion of black people. Despite the success of SEPPIR, the government has not fully embraced the importance of social inclusion at the most senior levels of government. Promoting racial equality in Brazil means facing the daunting task of including the majority of the population in society; therefore it must be viewed as a core activity by the government and provided with substantial financial and political resources.

Brazil has also sought a role as an international leader on issues of race. Brazil has taken a leadership role in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights at the Organization of American States (OAS). Brazil is the sole supporter of the Special Rapporteur for African-Descendants, a position held by Dr Clare Roberts, former president of the Inter-American Court. Brazil has also taken the lead on the Inter-American Convention against Discrimination, which is currently under consideration by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and has been strongly opposed by the US government. This convention attempts to provide black people with a regional mechanism to redress human rights violations throughout the Americas. Currently, a case of racial discrimination must be tried as a generic human rights violation, because there is no statute that oversees cases of racial discrimination in the OAS. The creation of the Inter-American Convention is a vital step to provide African-descendants and other minorities with a form of redress in countries where national courts have been reluctant to address racial inequities.

Brazil has also been the leading nation requesting follow-up to the UN World Conference against Racism, Xenophobia, and Related Forms of Intolerance. In 2006, Brazil sponsored the Conference of the Americas, which was envisioned as a continuation of the Santiago +5 preparatory committee session before the UN World Conference. This meeting was well attended by civil society representatives and included a wide range of issues related to discrimination and intolerance.

Land rights

According to SEPPIR there are 1,170 recognized *quilombo* heritage communities, but the real total could surpass 3,000. This would represent some 1.7 million people. The highest concentrations are in once inaccessible areas of Bahia (north-east), Pará (north), Mato Grosso (west), Goiás (central) and Minas Gerais (south-east). *Quilombos* also exist in major cities like Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.

Quilombos were created by fugitive African slaves during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Currently the inhabitants of these communities, '*Quilombolas*', continue to struggle to assert their cultural identity and historical ties to these lands. However, while these isolated communities were able to maintain their unique cultural traditions and identities, living conditions in these settlements are often some of the worst in Brazil.

In 2007, 91 per cent of *quilombo* families had monthly incomes of less than US \$190, though the national minimum wage is US \$204 a month. A government study shows that the number of malnourished children under the age of five in *quilombos* is 76 per cent higher than among the child population as a whole. Only 3.2 per cent of *quilombo* children have access to sanitation.

Quilombos have been recognized since the mid-1990s under ILO Convention No. 169 and the current programme includes granting collective land titles as well as improving roads and providing sanitation, water, education and health services.

Titling is viewed as all-important since some *quilombos* that existed before major cities like Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo were established eventually became absorbed as poor urban neighbourhoods.

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